

WHEATBELT FUTURES FORUM

WHITE PAPER

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INTRODUCTION

After the overwhelming success of the inaugural CBH Wheatbelt Futures Forum in 2023, the 2024 event, organised by the Wheatbelt Business Network and the Northam Chamber of Commerce, yet again gave a platform to provide insight into the development and growth of the Wheatbelt region.

The Wheatbelt Futures Forum was developed as an opportunity for businesses and stakeholders to receive information from local industry experts on future opportunities within the region.

The 2024 event showcased 15 panelists working in industries including agriculture, tourism, telecommunication, and government services.

Attended by local business owners, investors, and politicians, the forum was a further opportunity for networking and collaboration - a key tool for developing the Wheatbelt region moving forward.

Questions asked of our political leaders provided an opportunity for robust conversation and accountability to constituents.

This paper has been produced with the members of the Northam Chamber of Commerce and Wheatbelt Business Network in mind.

The White Paper can be used as a tool for stakeholders to continue to advocate for their needs, and a reminder of the potential of business growth within the Wheatbelt.

KEY TOPICS

The identification of key themes discussed as part of the 2024 CBH Wheatbelt Futures Forum gives insight into the current state of business within the region. Many of the key topics throughout the day were similar to those identified during the 2023 event - indicating that these issues, challenges and opportunities are still existent within our communities.



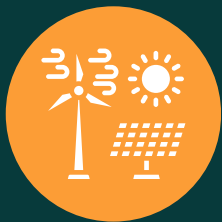
01 - Housing

A number of keynote speakers touched on the ongoing challenge of housing not just in the Wheatbelt but throughout the State. Attendees to the forum looked to political panelists for solutions and answers to how accessibility to housing can increase.



02 — Employment

Hiring challenges for business owners were a focal point of discussion. Attendees shared their experiences with international hiring and current challenges of obtaining local workers. Experts in immigration shared information on hiring processes for those interested.



03 — Renewable Energy

Updates were given to attendees on developments within the renewable energy space. Whether it be advancements in technology or businesses sharing renewable targets, the future of our renewable energy market was a big focus of the day.



04 - Disaster Management

As the result of widespread storms hitting the Wheatbelt region earlier this year, leaving many without power, internet, and other services vital to running businesses, it was no surprise to those in attendance that questions were asked of Western Power, Telstra, and the Government.

PAUL SMITH

CBH GROUP

CBH Group Chief Marketing and Trading Officer Paul Smith provided attendees with an update on the cooperative's achievements over the past 12 months, with particular focus on the relationship between the group and Wheatbelt regional communities.

Highlighting the significance of grain production in WA, Smith noted export figures totaling \$16.2 billion in FY23, with grain contributing \$12.1 billion and providing employment for 24,000 individuals.

Smith emphasised CBH's commitment to sustainability and value creation for growers through its "Path to 2033" strategy, in which the group aims to receive an average 22 million-tonne crop by 2033, with substantial portions earmarked for international markets and fertiliser.

Grains grown by Wheatbelt farmers have seen success overseas with local exports being used in the creation of Heineken beer, udon noodles in Japan, instant noodles throughout Southeast Asia, and WA oats being considered a superfood in China, highlighting exciting opportunities internationally.

Smith acknowledged CBH's commitment to fostering strong relationships with regional communities, investing heavily in community initiatives, sports, healthcare, and capacity-building programs. Smith highlighted that if CBH supported their growers to be strong, that in turn their communities will also be strong. As a major employer in the Wheatbelt, Smith said the relationship between CBH and the communities it operates out of was symbiotic. He noted that the business wanted to see communities thrive so that they could continue to employ strong talent. This support totalled \$1.6 million in 2023, between 200 different organisations. Cooperatives have also been rolled out by CBH to teach regional communities how to establish their own cooperatives, which have seen 60 attendees participate, representing 49 regional towns.

EVA COLIC

TELSTRA

Telstra Regional Engagement Manager Eva Colic addressed the Wheatbelt Futures Forum with information about the phasing out of 3G technology and provided a response to concerns surrounding Telstra's reliability during a recent weather event in the region.

With the closure of the 3G network imminent, Colic explained that Telstra was ramping up efforts to upgrade infrastructure to cater for the continued rollout of 5G services. She noted that although the 3G network was being decommissioned, infrastructure would be repurposed for the expansion of 5G which was promising customers greater speeds and capacity.

Colic addressed common misconceptions about signal strength indicators on phones, saying that the number of bars present on your phone was not always accurate and a fair evaluation of your connection strength. She said bars could differ from phone brands and that there was no current regulation on how bars were measured.

Disaster management was addressed in Colic's presentation due to widespread impacts on businesses and households throughout the Wheatbelt in February following a weather event. Colic said Telstra was working to improve the resilience of the network, and that in many cases sites would go down due to power outages in the area. She said that often in regional areas there were logistical limits on backup power needed to keep towers operating. Colic assured attendees that Telstra had a dedicated team on the ground when such events take place to install generators to resume Telstra services.

Furthermore, Colic discussed Telstra's efforts to connect regional areas through satellite connectivity, acknowledging that the technology was still evolving and had limitations in reliability compared to traditional mobile networks.

NAOMI EVANS

NBN LOCAL

NBN Local Regional Development and Engagement Manager Naomi Evans presented insights into the evolving landscape of big data usage.

Evans shared that there had been an exponential increase in data consumption over the past decade, exemplified by 12 billion streams into homes and an average of 22 connected devices per household. Ten years ago, each household was using 40mb of data per month compared to 400mb per month on average in 2024.

Evans highlighted the desire of NBN to deliver faster, more reliable internet services to customers, and how important it was for those living in the regions to have improved experiences similar to that of their city counterparts. NBN is actively upgrading its infrastructure across three key technologies: fixed line, fixed wireless, and satellite, aiming to deliver speeds equivalent to those in urban areas.

By expanding reach and increasing speeds, particularly in rural and remote regions, NBN seeks to enhance user experiences and bridge the digital divide.

Evans emphasised that NBN was a wholesaler and did not have affiliations with any particular telecommunication provider, despite some misconceptions.

Evans encouraged those in attendance to communicate their experiences, report faults, and demand improved services from their providers, in order to incite positive change.

SHANE DURYEA

WESTERN POWER

Western Power Head of Network Operations Shane Duryea provided an overview of the company's extensive operations and infrastructure, which serves 2 million people connected to a grid covering 255,000km².

With a focus on ensuring sufficient infrastructure for transitioning to renewables, Duryea discussed vital network enhancements, including \$708 million in State Government funding to Western Power to plan for an increase to future renewable generation.

Duryea emphasised that there was no one size fits all approach when it comes to powering regional WA due to ageing infrastructure. Local investments within the Wheatbelt included:

- \$3 million in network improvements in Pingelly and Cuballing where 230 poles and 27km of overhead lines were replaced
- \$5 million in network improvements in Cunderdin and Meckering where 290 poles and 47km of overhead powerlines were replaced and LED street lights were installed.
- 19 transformers in the Midwest and Wheatbelt have been upgraded to increase network resilience

Western Power's response to widespread power outages on January 17, 2024 were raised by Duryea who explained that a combination of bushfires, heatwaves, thunderstorms, and pole top fires led to 34,000 customers being offline. Duryea said more than 700 Western Power staff were deployed to assist with more than 350 identified hazards throughout the state. Five power towers were taken down in the January storm which needed collaboration between DFES and other service providers to resolve.

Duryea said Western Power was working to improve their communication with customers during and after power outage events and needed continued feedback from customers on how they could do better.

WARREN PEARCE

AMEC

Association of Mining and Exploration Companies (AMEC) CEO Warren Pearce updated attendees on the state of the mining and exploration industry so far in 2024. Pearce noted that WA was coming off a period of strong investment and record mineral exploration expenditure, but said that investment had stagnated in the last 12 months.

Pearce provided an update on the Chalice Mining Gonneville project discovery in March 2020, where a high-grade platinum copper nickel deposit was uncovered in Julimar, near Toodyay. Chalice Mining had most recently proposed their development to the Environmental Protection Authority, signifying substantial progress to the project. Pearce said the discovery had generated significant interest in the mineral potential of the Wheatbelt.

Looking at the state of play of exploration in the Wheatbelt, Pearce said there had not been a significant amount of progress in the region within the last 12 months, citing a weak investment environment. He said an additional challenge was the lengthy nature of land access negotiations.

Despite this, Pearce said exploration efforts would continue within the Wheatbelt, as the region was still considered majorly under-explored. He said that within the industry there was a strong belief that there were significant critical mineral and gold resources yet to be discovered in the Wheatbelt.

Pearce said AMEC, made up of 27 groups, was determined to continue to work in partnership with business and landowners. He said the group wanted to ensure that members interacted openly, honestly, and fairly with the communities they were operating in. Pearce said potential projects had the capacity over time to develop into mining projects that would create new employment and economic opportunities for the region.

AARON MOREY

CCIWA

Chamber of Commerce and Industry WA Chief Economist and Director of Policy, Influence, and Strategy Aaron Morey shared his analysis of the current economic climate not only locally but internationally.

Morey said when it came to the global economy, there were currently two major challenges: the growth of interest rates and geopolitical risks including ongoing conflict.

Looking at the West Australian economy, Morey observed that there had been a high level of activity that was yet to peak but acknowledged that identified barriers to business growth included rising operating costs and labour shortages. On an even more local front, Morey said Wheatbelt locals had identified that rising costs associated with running a business, and red and/or green tape was a challenge or factor that had the potential for businesses to close or scale back their operations.

When it came to households within WA, Morey told audiences that consumer confidence ratings had come down over recent times but were still considered reasonably confident. He said the cost of living expenses were having a negative impact on consumer confidence, and that households did not have excessive disposable income.

CCIWA as a group reported that there had been a recent 23 per cent increase in costs associated with building a home. Morey said the housing sector in WA was tight, with high demand. He said that there was an increase in the number of houses being completed, but nowhere near enough to meet demand.

Looking ahead, Morey said it was his prediction that the state economy would continue to expand with ongoing capacity to grow in mining and agriculture. He said there was no quick solution to housing struggles and that it was likely that the housing market would remain tight for some time.

PANEL ONE

QUESTION & ANSWER

PAUL SMITH
CBH GROUP

Q: Given the significant damage to road infrastructure, will you consider an investment/contribution scheme to local governments for maintenance and repairs?

- From a CBH perspective, we continue to work with local governments to support the roads.
- We are a cooperative, so if we were to move towards funding roads, it would mean increased costs to growers.
- We currently work with local governments to give them data about the roads and their conditions, and liaise with them to source funding required to upkeep the roads.

EVA COLIC
TELSTRA

Q: What is Telstra doing to ensure continuous power to Telstra towers in the Wheatbelt? Why won't you work with willing local governments to allow them to assist during emergencies with backup generators to mobile phone sites?

- Telstra is currently working on a project that is investigating the possibility of putting switches on the outside of local phone towers so that local governments can connect generators in the event of an outage.
- Letting anyone into a mobile site is very dangerous if they don't know what they are doing, so we are having to design a solution to this issue.
- Outages to Telstra towers generally happen when the power is down. There are currently backups at every tower, which is designed to last 12 hours, but as outages happen, those batteries get depleted. These batteries aren't designed to power sites for long periods of time. To combat this, we do our best to get technicians out as quickly as possible.

PANEL ONE

QUESTION & ANSWER

NAOMI EVANS

NBN LOCAL

Q: The nbn satellites are approaching the end of life. Has a decision been taken to replace them or will the future of nbn satellite change?

- These satellites are not at the end of their life. Currently, two of our satellites are halfway through their lifespan and have a remaining eight years in operation, at which time they will run out of fuel and we will take them out gently.
- Low orbit satellites are on our radar as a future opportunity.

SHANE DURYEA

WESTERN POWER

Q: What is Western Power doing to resolve the extensive delays experienced by developers small and large? The delays are impacting regional development. Current claim for interruption is \$120 for outages lasting more than 12 hours. This doesn't equate to the earnings lost in small business.

- We acknowledge that there have been delays in establishing new connections and this has not been good enough on our part. We have a team dedicated to this area. The question was taken on notice with a response to be sent out to attendees at a later date.
- Western Power administers compensation payments on behalf of the government. We do not set the payment rates and this amount set is beyond our control. The question was taken on notice with a response to be sent out to attendees at a later date.

PANEL ONE

QUESTION & ANSWER

WARREN PEARCE

AMEC

Q: If land access is a lengthy process, what can we do to up-skill, educate and empower landowners to work with explorers?

- Traditionally, exploration is seen as an inconvenience to landowners. We want to work with you to give you information about your land and help you understand that we want to be a partner. It is worth understanding what you are entitled to if things are found on your land. If you are approached by an exploration company, tell them what you would like to see from them. We will work around your operational needs. We can do that between your harvesting and sowing so we aren't impacting you as much.

AARON MOREY

CCIWA

The Australian Financial Review suggests there are potentially three to five more rate increases to come from the Reserve Bank of Australia. What is your opinion?

- At this point in time, it is my view that we may see interest rates start to come down in early 2025. There are still some economists who expect some rate cuts as early as October this year and others who think there are still some rises to come. There are lots of variations in views within the industry. I personally believe we will see a long, slow decline in interest rates.

LINDA VERNON

NEWTRAVEL

North Eastern Wheatbelt Travel Association (NEWTRAVEL) Tourism Officer Linda Vernon provided an overview of tourism in the Wheatbelt region, labeling it as underdeveloped and lacking funding, yet essential for community wellbeing and economic stability.

Vernon said that although data is limited, the Wheatbelt stood out as the most frequented area in WA's Golden Outback, with the majority of visitors being day-trippers. NEWTRAVEL was motivated to increase the number of days in which tourists were staying in the region and encouraging overnight stays, which had the potential to promote more expenditure within Wheatbelt towns.

NEWTRAVEL aims to boost tourism, draw in overnight guests, and improve the region's appeal, believing that a thriving tourism sector benefits local communities.

The Wheatbelt Way, a self-drive route connecting nine communities, had experienced a remarkable 1000% rise in visitors over the last decade. However, Vernon said challenges persisted within the space, like seasonality of wildflowers, limited accessibility due to the lack of public transport and many businesses not being open on weekends, when visitors are more likely to be out and about.

NEWTRAVEL advocates for diversifying tourism beyond popular sites like Wave Rock, stressing the importance of tourists engaging with locals, the need for additional accommodation providers, and delivering quality experiences to draw people to the region.

Agritourism emerged as a promising opportunity for tourism, aligning with the Wheatbelt's agricultural strengths, though obstacles remain.

Vernon said increased backing for agritourism, including the establishment of a state agritourism association, would embrace the potential for economic advancement and bridging urban-rural gaps.

KATHERINE RAYNER

URBIS

Urbis Senior Consultant Katherine Rayner shares how housing stresses can have follow-on effects to all parts of our communities. Rayner said a lack of secure housing had the ability to impact financial security, physical and mental health and wellbeing, quality of life, criminality, and the need for social services assistance. She noted that many of these impacts then put a strain on all levels of Government, making housing security of high importance.

Looking at the Wheatbelt, Rayner said post COVID-19 more people were moving to the region, with the most common age group being the 10-49 year old demographic. She said the Wheatbelt housing market was cyclical, with a stable population of around 40 percent owning their own house outright.

Rayner said there was limited private development at scale within the Wheatbelt, with local and state governments leading the way with significant new dwelling approvals taking place in Northam, Toodyay, Chittering, and Gingin.

Identified housing challenges in the Wheatbelt included increased construction costs, short-term accommodation competition within the rental market, and ageing houses within the market. Rayner said construction costs have a lot to answer for with the increase in prices for concrete, steel, plumbing, transport, and freight.

Rayner explained that the complex issue of housing required complex solutions, which needed to be targeted and clear. She said that a suggested framework to tackle housing constraints included policy controls and information development, unlocking land that is ready to be built on, and incentives and subsidies.

Rayner said if we can get the right people in the right houses benefits would include major investment attraction, increased financial security, improved physical and mental health and wellbeing, reduced pressure on social and at-risk services, staff retention and attraction, improved business viability and growth, and improved resilience and sustainability.

KATHY HOARE

DEPARTMENT OF TRAINING AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Department of Training and Workforce Development State Workforce Planning Director Kathy Hoare provided a comprehensive overview of the current employment and training trend throughout the Wheatbelt.

According to Hoare, there were 42,600 people currently employed in Wheatbelt, with 23,000 not in the labour force. She said it was important to entice those not currently working back into the workforce. Hoare said of those currently unemployed, 18.5 percent were people who held a Certificate I or II.

The most popular workforces within the Wheatbelt were agriculture, healthcare and social assistance, education and training, and manufacturing.

When it came to training activity, in 2023 there were 3,570 enrollments in the VET system, of which 12 percent were employment based, and 88 percent institutional based. The most popular trade enrollments for 2023 were automotive and mechanical, community services, health and education, mining industry, metals and manufacturing services, and finance, property and business services.

Hoare spoke of the Year 9 Career Taster Program that last year saw 684 students from 31 schools take part. The program educated students on the jobs of the future, and Hoare encouraged business owners in attendance to get in touch to have their own stall at the event.

In terms of future opportunities for the Wheatbelt, Hoare spoke of the importance of training young people in skills for jobs that may not already exist. She said advancements in clean energy were an example of this. Hoare said there was a need to develop a pipeline of suitably skilled workers that are needed to support the transition to net-zero emissions by 2050. She challenged those in attendance to question how they can future-proof their businesses with skills and training.

SHAUN BURRESS

BIRO

Department of Home Affairs WA Business, Industry and Regional Outreach Officer Shaun Burress shared the role BIRO plays in bridging the gap between employers considering hiring immigrants and those looking to work in Australia. He said BIRO's role was to increase the understanding of available immigration programs that support business, industry, and regional communities and employers. BIRO provided a forum for businesses and employers to raise concerns and be given information to make informed migration decisions.

Burress revealed that there had been 6.4 million visa applications made within the 2023/24 program year, a 27 per cent increase from the same period in 2022/23. He said there was a priority focus on regional areas, skills applications in healthcare and teaching, and employer-sponsored visas.

Burress spoke of the skilled occupation list online tool that served as a 'matchmaker' service, showing employers workers that were interested in moving to Australia with particular qualifications. Burress said BIRO can come on board with employers to help them understand what is involved in the process of engaging overseas workers.

Key actions identified by BIRO included:

- Building a new temporary skills migration system
- Reshaping the permanent skills migration system
- Strengthening the integrity of international education
- Tackling working exploitation and the misuse of the visa system
- Planning migration to get the right skills in the right places
- Redesigning regional visas
- Deepening people-to-people ties in the Indo-Pacific
- Simplifying the system to improve the experience for migrants and employers

DANIEL MOSS

ODIS

Office of Defence Industry Support (ODIS) Defence Industry Advisor Daniel Moss dispelled misconceptions that in order to engage with defence industry manufacturing you had to have the capacity to build warships. Moss explained that the opportunity for Wheatbelt businesses to engage in the multi-billion dollar defence industry was accessible with the right level of understanding.

Moss said ODIS was considered a one-stop shop for all things defence industry and wanted to be a link between the industry wanting to enter the defence supply chain and the Department of Defence.

The Wheatbelt was described by Moss as resourceful, resilient, and innovative, with parts of a warship currently being built locally in Cunderdin. Moss challenged audiences by asking what role their business could play in the building and maintenance of ships and submarines.

Moss said businesses could be eligible to successfully obtain defence industry funding if they had an ABN and developed products or services that had defence application or could have defence application. He said that ODIS engaged with businesses through on-site visits, outreach programs, and online resources. Moss said advisors from ODIS were always interested in talking to businesses about how they could get involved.

A special acknowledgment was given to Bolgart business owner Mandy Walker who was named Agrifutures Rural Woman of the Year for 2024, for a project working with Wheatbelt businesses to gain defence industry contracts.

PANEL TWO

QUESTION & ANSWER

LINDA VERNON

NEWTRAVEL

Q: Are there efforts being made for Shires to work together to promote tourism within the entire Wheatbelt? Do you think that multi-day festivals could be the solution to overnight stays and if so, how do you think you'd fund/approve such an event?

- Tourism WA does not currently recognize the Wheatbelt with any boundaries which can make it difficult to market. I believe it takes very clear branding to succeed in tourism in the Wheatbelt. We did have a voluntary group working together to advocate for tourism, but they were all very time poor and under-resourced. We need some additional leadership and resources in this space.
- Multi-day festivals could definitely be part of the solution. We already have the Dowerin Field Days that are recognized nationally. The issue is that often events are run by volunteers, and we need to know how to run these events sustainably so they aren't just one-offs.

SHAUN BURRESS AND ROSS D'ANGELO

BIRO

Q: Please explain why the visa process takes so long; 10 + months and high costs.

- Timelines for processing can be as short as 5 to 7 days if it is for a priority industry. The average processing time is 28 days. We encourage applicants and businesses to check twice and submit once to ensure a faster turnaround time. Every time we have to come back to you for additional information it adds 28 days to the processing time. We can't come back to you earlier than the 28 days. The Australian Government also needs to do their own checks on the applicant in question. Wait times can also depend on the country of origin and the industry in question. Usually, there is a reason if there is a long processing time.

PANEL TWO

QUESTION & ANSWER

KATHY HOARE

DEPARTMENT OF TRAINING AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Q: TAFE are often so hard to deal with as someone using apprentices and trainees. Is it just as bad for students and is that part of the problem with completion? Is the cost of accessing TAFE blocks in Perth (accommodation) a barrier to completion of apprenticeships?

- It is disappointing to hear that people are finding it difficult to interact with the TAFE system and providers. I would encourage business owners and employers to speak to TAFE directly if they are experiencing any issues. The VET system is a complex beast and can be hard for a small business to navigate. We can't always have a cookie cutter approach to an apprenticeship and there is a need to modernise how it functions. VET can be flexible so ask the question and speak up. There are also support services available for your apprentices and their mental health.
- Block release through TAFE is a challenge in regional WA. We know through statistics that when an apprentice is able to complete TAFE in their home locality they are more likely to succeed and complete their training. Living pressures for young people are also contributing to lower completion rates.

KATHERINE RAYNER

URBIS

Q: How do we make the State Government understand that the regions have more of a need for worker housing rather than social housing?

- We understand that local governments are currently looking to obtain funding for worker housing. The most effective way is to go directly to your local politicians. When you are asking for funding and assistance you need to be clear that it is going to provide economic development. Everyone wants funding for housing. It is a competitive pool of funding. You need to be able to present a strong case.

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DARREN WEST MLC

MEMBER FOR THE AGRICULTURE REGION

Member of the Agricultural Region Darren West MLC provided a ministerial update to attendees, with optimistic sentiment throughout.

West said it was an exciting time for the agricultural sector, as he believed there had never been a time where everyone had wanted to be involved in the industry like today's climate. West said there had not been the current level of investment into agriculture before, and there was great light on the horizon.

West highlighted the opportunity for investment into the Wheatbelt through the Government's RED grants which provide funding for individual projects that contribute to increasing or sustaining jobs, expanding or diversifying industry, developing skills or capability, increasing business productivity, and attracting new investment to the regions. Applications are open until June 26, 2024.

West's address was given days before the 2024 State Budget was handed down, in which he said by having a strong economic State Government and strong books, it meant that projects and funding were possible. He said that housing and workforce development was a priority of the State Government.

With an estimated 1000 people relocating to the Wheatbelt region each week, West said that housing was a continuing challenge.

Renewable energy was also a priority for the State Government, according to West, who said that currently WA was sitting at 34 percent renewables, with a target of 92 percent by 2042. He said that was an exciting time for renewable funding opportunities for businesses and that significant investment was continuing to be made into solar and other renewable energies.

RENEE MANNING

WHEATBELT DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

Wheatbelt Development Commission Principal Regional Development Officer Renee Manning expanded on the current economic health of the Wheatbelt region. In her address, Manning said the Wheatbelt was responsible for a gross domestic product market worth \$8.707 billion and produced \$16.99 billion worth of economic output. With a population of 72,924, Manning said the region was stable and growing. She cited mining and agriculture as being dual economic drivers for the region, with both of their economic outputs being on par.

When it comes to the Wheatbelt workforce, Manning said 30,706 people within the region were currently employed, with 6,358 working in the region and living elsewhere, and 6,714 living in the region and working elsewhere.

Manning said continual regional challenges for the Wheatbelt included the ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and natural disasters. She said communities and their economies needed to be able to prepare for such challenges ahead of them striking. Slow burn issues identified included housing. New emerging challenges shared with audiences were the growth and development of renewable energy. Manning said it was a challenge for businesses to keep up with the industry as it was evolving at such a fast pace.

REDS grants were also highlighted by Manning as an opportunity for businesses to diversify and improve economic development within the region.

JEFF HEALY

SMALL BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

Small Business Development Corporation Executive Director Strategy, Corporate and State-wide Services Jeff Healy used his presentation at the 2024 CBH Wheatbelt Futures Forum to explain the role of the organisation and how it can be utilised by small businesses within the Wheatbelt. Healy said the SBDC existed to help businesses start well, maintain and survive.

A key focus and encouragement to audiences was the utilisation of technology within their businesses. Healy used an example of using AI and automation to streamline operations in which a business had bookings, reminders, and payments all set up virtually, enhancing customer experiences and freeing up time for the owner. Healy said technology integration into your business could be as simple as online banking, and as advanced as the use of AI.

Benefits Healy identified as part of using technology more effectively in your business included growing revenue, reduced costs, increased efficiency, improvements to decision making and planning, and enhanced compliance.

Although, Healy acknowledged that there were considerable barriers still in place for Wheatbelt businesses when it came to getting the most out of technology. Those barriers included connectivity, lack of understanding, capacity, and costs.

Healy encouraged the audience to reach out to the SBDC for advice and guidance on how to best integrate the use of technology into their own business.

PANEL THREE

QUESTION & ANSWER

Q: Why won't the State Government acknowledge rural housing market failures and contribute financially to addressing this issue?

Hon. Darren West MLC

- Housing is our biggest challenge in the state. We can't build any more houses than we already are. There is a shortage of people building them and there is not much more we can do. I don't think it is fair to say that the State Government is not addressing the issue. We will continue to build houses, but we can't build them fast enough for the demand. We have put out incentives for people to build and buy, and now we are being criticised because there is now a shortage of builders. There is a limit to which Government can try and manipulate the housing market.

Hon. Melissa Price MP

- If I were in Government I would establish a program for local governments where they are aware of land owned by the State Government. In Dalwallinu there are two blocks of land owned by the State Government but they don't want to build state housing on it. Why not give it to the local government to develop? The answer is council housing and local governments.

Hon. Mia Davies MLA

- We don't need to reinvent the wheel. We need to make sure that there is less red tape for local governments and private developers to build houses. Government GROW housing requirements are very specific, so I believe Government needs to change some of the parameters so we can cater to different types of houses.

Hon. Steve Martin MLC

- We have a housing issue, not a bedroom issue as we have couples in houses with six rooms that they aren't utilising. There is currently too much red tape for private investors and we need to find ways to get them to invest. We need to look to local and State Government to address this issue.

PANEL THREE

QUESTION & ANSWER

Q: The payroll tax threshold of \$1 million is too low and no longer fit for purpose. What is being done about this?

Hon. Darren West MLC

- We would love nothing more than to slash payroll tax. Every government before us has retained it. It is good revenue for the Government. It does need to be raised again and the argument to review the threshold is a good one. I am not sure what the Treasurer's plan for it is.

Hon. Steve Martin MLC

- If not raise it now, then when? It is a disgrace. We have an opportunity with the State Government being in a surplus budget that we can do some changes to stamp duty as well.

Hon. Mia Davies MLA

- Some of this has to do with time and circumstance. Currently, there is stable income coming into the government through federal GST distribution, and it is a sensible time to do it now. When we were in Government I was asked this question, but this is now a very different set of books. If at the next election we are in a position to form government we will raise the payroll tax threshold to \$1.3 million.

Q: Darren, no Labor Minister attended when they were invited. There is 1 Labor representative but 3 opposition - is this indicative of Labor's view of the Wheatbelt?

Hon. Darren West MLC

It is hard to get Ministers out to the Wheatbelt a week ahead of the Budget. We appreciate the Wheatbelt and value it, and regularly get Ministers out to visit. I don't want you to feel like you aren't valued by this Government. No Government has spent as much money as we have within the Wheatbelt. If you want a particular Minister to come out come and see us and we can see what we can do. I will try and get the Premier to come and visit the Wheatbelt.

PANEL THREE

QUESTION & ANSWER

Q: Given the dispersed nature of the Wheatbelt, how can we get alignment with all three levels of government?

Renee Manning

- This is the question that anyone who lives in the Wheatbelt has to grapple with. There are good examples of the Wheatbelt working together including the Wheatbelt Strategic Freight Network and CEACA's aged care solutions. To get that to happen requires a lot of will and effort and time, although it does and can happen.

Hon. Mia Davies MLA

- The Wheatbelt is unique. We are good at identifying problems. If you're looking to try and convince any level of government to invest in a small community it can be challenging. Governments tend to like bigger projects. We need the data and glue to create a business case for the government and private sector to invest in those bigger projects. We need to take ownership of data for our region.

Hon. Melissa Price MP

- A lot of good ideas come from local governments because they have their finger on the pulse. What I'm seeing is that geographically we need to determine what our major project is as a zone and come together to push it together from collaboration. Money is scarce on a local level so we all need to work towards the same thing together.

Hon. Darren West MLC

- There is value in creating relationships with your local councillors and Federal Members of Parliament. There is nothing like speaking to someone face to face.

Hon. Steve Martin MLC

- The best results start in rooms like this.

NEXT STEPS

Would you like to carry on the conversations from this year's CBH Wheatbelt Futures Forum? Do you have ideas and solutions for the challenges that were discussed? There are numerous opportunities to invest in your business's growth and the overall development of the Wheatbelt region. We recommend considering the following steps to help secure our future:



01 — Join your local CCI

No matter if you reside in Northam, Merredin, or beyond, we recommend exploring membership with your local Chamber of Commerce and Business Network.



02 — Contact your local politicians

Regardless of their political affiliation, it is crucial for our local, state, and federal representatives to understand your priorities and the needs of your business to effectively advocate on your behalf. Reach out to your local office to address concerns, highlight achievements, or inquire about how they can support you.



03 — Collaborate with other businesses

No one understands your community better than fellow locals. Utilise the connections established at the 2024 CBH Wheatbelt Futures Forum to forge new opportunities within your community, whether it's forming professional networks or connecting through social media. We are excited to witness the collaborative outcomes that emerge.

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